

WORLD DOMINION

The World Dominion Movement advocates Informed Continuous Co-ordinated Evangelism to reach everyone at home and abroad. Its basis is belief in the Deity and Atoning Death of the Lord Jesus Christ, the World's Only Saviour, and in the Final Authority of Holy Scripture.

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Syria—A Danger Spot in the Eastern Mediterranean

JOSEPH J. COOKSEY.

The complexity of the situation in Syria, dealt with in the following article, requires a few explanatory notes.

The treaties signed by France in 1936, which replaced her mandate over Syria, were to have come into force this year, 1939, and were intended to confirm complete Syrian independence. France has now withheld ratification in view of the lack of internal cohesion, the territorial ambitions of Turkey and the Mediterranean aspirations of Italy, whereby the independence of a divided Syria is threatened. France, in the present international situation, maintains the mandate as an absolutely necessary protective measure.

The article deals with the efforts made by France to strengthen national unity by means of the Communities Ordinance, which, by granting religious liberty and a freer social status, corrected the disuniting influences of Syria's *mélange* of religious sects. The Moslems, who are predominant, made vital religious concessions, under the Ordinance, to achieve independence from the Mandate—concessions which, now that independence is delayed, are repudiated as being contrary to Moslem law.

The article suggests reasons why France has been unable more effectively to assist Britain in Palestine, and reveals that she is facing a problem in Syria apparently as difficult of solution as that now faced by Britain in Palestine.

IT is safe to predict that the year 1936 will never be forgotten in Syria. On 9th September of that year France concluded with Syria and the Lebanon, treaties which substituted alliances for the mandate which the French Government had exercised since 1920. The treaties were to have come into force this year (1939), and were designed to bring under one National Government the regional Governments of the Syrian Republic, the Lebanese Republic, the Government of Latakia and the Government of Jebel Druze.

The Foreign Affairs Committee of the French Senate demanded, however, the postponement of ratification and M. Bonnet, the Foreign Minister, agreed. Conversations between this Minister and Jemil Bek Mardam, the Syrian Prime Minister, were thereupon entered into, and lasted for four months, the result being the drafting of several appendices to the treaties which would assure

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effective French protection over the country for a number of years. The Syrian Prime Minister approved the appendices and returned to Syria to lay them before the Syrian Parliament. That body at once protested and demanded that it should take over all public powers remaining in French hands.

The response of France was the despatch of M. Gabriel Puaux as its new High Commissioner, who at Beirut (the capital of the Lebanon) broadcast on 11th January, the following message to the whole country :

‘ In the present state of international equilibrium, the presence of France is the only effective guarantee of the territorial integrity and independence of Syria. Were France to withdraw or her forces to be weakened, Syrian patriots would see their dearest dreams disappear.’

Issued from the capital of Christian Lebanon as a sounding board, the message had special reference to the Syrian Republic which is predominantly Moslem, and the High Commissioner forthwith proceeded to Damascus, its capital. Disorders thereupon broke out in Syria and intermittently continued until the resignation of Jemil Bek Mardam's Cabinet on 18th February after consultation with the National *bloc*. The Nationalists demand nothing less than the implementation of the treaties of 1936 and the abrogation of the mandate. Matters came to a head when the Council of Ulema denounced the Communities Ordinance issued by the Comte de Martel, the former High Commissioner, as being contrary to Moslem Sheri Law, and called upon the Government to suspend its application. M. Gabriel Puaux, the new High Commissioner, reminded the Ministers that they had approved it before its publication and insisted upon its enforcement. The Communities Ordinance marked an act of high administrative courage, making possible real religious liberty in a land which has not known it for many centuries.

The newspaper *Al-Bechir* of 9th July, published the relevant parts of the Decree of 13th March, 1936, Communities Ordinance—(No. 60. L.R.), issued by the High Commissioner, which assures this liberty :

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ARTICLE I. 'Anyone who has become of age and is of sound mind may forsake or join a sect with a recognized system of personal law, which action shall have civil effectiveness. He may also secure the correction of his registration in the records of identity, upon the presentation of an application to this effect to the registry bureau in the place where he resides, and when required, of a certificate from the proper authorities of admission to the sect he has embraced.'

The publication of the text followed a controversy between the Governor of Latakia and Father Vixivir, the Jesuit missionary in Tartous, to whose converts the Governor had refused to grant official registration. The missionary threatened law proceedings on the ground that full religious liberty was enjoyed by the people of Syria. The matter came before the law courts and the missionary's contention was upheld. A Government communication to Father Vixivir acknowledged the same fact, and delicately excused the action of the Governor of Latakia on the ground that great care must be exercised to ensure that those persons who change their sect do so from sincere conviction, so that possible trouble between the local authority and the community may be avoided.

Moslem susceptibilities are deeply wounded by the Communities Ordinance for a number of reasons. It classes them as a community like other communities. They number 1,514,755 out of a total population of 3,630,000 (1935 census) and, heretofore, have considered themselves as too important, both numerically and religiously, to be classified with lesser communities. Further, the Communities Ordinance permits a Moslem to change his religion, the change being officially recognized and registered, whereas the Sheri Law, maintaining the Law of Apostasy, formally prescribes the death penalty, although it cannot now publicly be carried out. The Communities Ordinance permits a Moslem, who has changed his faith, to retain his Moslem wife, and facilitates the marriage of a non-Moslem to a Moslem woman, an act hitherto regarded as impossible and worthy of death.

That the French High Commissioner succeeded in

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convincing the progressive elements in the country and Parliament that this measure was necessary to achieve national unity was a signal administrative triumph. No less was it a triumph for those Syrian patriots who supported him and braved reactionary Moslem opposition. This was in 1936. Significant changes since then have taken place both in the internal and external situation of Syria, which, taken together, largely explain the recent French decision to maintain the mandate. The loss of Alexandretta to the Turks was a severe blow to national unity, for which the National Party was in no wise responsible. But apart from this, there is a list of failures to their account which have created doubt of their readiness for independent control of the country.

First, there was the matter of Jebel Druze. After the Syrian rebellion of 1925 and 1926, Jebel Druze was separated from the Republic of Syria, and had its independent Government and Constitution under the protection of the French Mandate. In 1936, the Franco-Syrian treaty having been signed, Jebel Druze was again annexed to Syria ; for Syria being the chief of the four territories under the French Mandate, was the nucleus of the proposed unified nation. Again, however, Jebel Druze has broken away from Syria. The Syrian officials have been driven out, the Syrian flag pulled down, and the Druzes have proclaimed their allegiance and loyalty to France. The reasons for this fissiparous action can only be briefly indicated : The Syrian Nationalist officials apparently took charge of the country with a high hand, filled the Government posts, and manifested their inexperience and incompetence. Druze leaders, such as Sultan Pasha Attrash, Abdul Ghaffar Pasha Attrash and other personalities, appear to have been put aside—men who legitimately expected an equitable share in the Government.

Second, there is the breaking away of the Jazeera from Syria. This territory in north Syria is a vast fertile plain, with rich petroleum deposits. In 1920, Kurds, Christian refugees from Iraq and Turkey, and Arab Bedouin tribes, began to settle in it. It was brought under

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the control of the first Syrian Government, which appointed as Governor the Amir Bahjat Shahabi. His administration was marked by fierce conflicts between Moslems and Christians which ended in the massacre of Amouda in August 1937, and correspondence seized by the French is said to have revealed a design violently to suppress the Christian minority. At present the Jazeera is under the direct supervision of the French as Mandatory authority.

Third, there is the disaffection of the Alawiyya, who, under the leadership of Suleim-al-Murshid, their deputy in the Syrian parliament, claim their independence and separate administration under French protection. The Alawiyya, who number 227,930, are considered to be a heterodox sect of Moslems who own allegiance to Ali, bin Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of Mohammed. Previous to 1936 they had an independent Government, but in that year, they, together with the Druzes, were incorporated into Syria. Two successive Governors appointed by the Syrian Parliament failed successfully to administer the Alawiyya. The Governors were Sunni Moslems, their subjects heterodox dissenters, and a serious religious clash could hardly have been avoided. Beside this mutual hostility the same mistakes appear to have been made, through incompetence and selfish domination, which prevented success in the Jebel Druze.

Had Syria registered three successes in her attempt at unification, instead of three failures, she might have hoped for the adhesion of the Republic of the Lebanon. Progressive and prosperous, with a standard of living and a way of life considered to be superior to that of Moslem Syria, this predominantly Christian State has kept an open mind on the question of national unification. It had its doubts, but was open to examine proofs of success, and these have not been forthcoming.

The root cause of this failure must be sought in Syria's bewildering *mélange* of antipathetic races and religions. It has more sects, schisms, heresies, divisions and subdivisions in religion, than any other country of the Near East. The population is mainly composed of Moslems,

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who number more than one million-and-a-half, most of whom are of the Sunni sect. The Shiite sect, however, is represented by a rich, unorthodox variety. The Alawiyya (Nusairis) manage to mix Shiite Islam with Christian and other elements; the Ismailians and the Druzes trace the Imamate through Ismail, Jaafar's eldest son; the Batinis, greatly daring, stand for the divinity of the Fatimite Khalif El Hakim; the Metawilehs are deep in heresy and strange rites, though not so accomplished in esoteric initiation as the Druzes. In addition, there are Yezidis, Babis and many others; sects which are a law unto themselves, little kingdoms of the soul, autonomous and self-satisfied.

To this Moslem confusion must be added a similar Christian confusion. Christians number little more than half-a-million, composed of Maronites, Greek Catholics (Uniats), Armenian Catholics (Uniats), Armenian Melkites and Greek Orthodox. Protestants number 8,887. Beside a body of Bishops, these Churches have fifteen Archbishops, six Patriarchs and one Latin Apostolic Delegate.

These prelates are as able politicians as they are spiritual fathers, since all political and social life is based upon religion. They preside over the religious courts and rule in matters of marriage and divorce, inheritance and adoption, and legal personal matters generally. Every resident citizen must be enrolled in a religion or a sect to avoid endless difficulties, and upon this sectarian basis rests even parliamentary representation. Any person attempting to change his allegiance to any of these sects would undertake a task of exceeding difficulty, and maybe of some danger.

To hew a path of liberty through this Moslem and Christian ecclesiastical jungle was obviously the intention of the Comte de Martel, the former French High Commissioner. His instrument was the Communities Ordinance, which would give every citizen a new personal status and an emancipating religious and social freedom. But in the case of the Moslems it cut across sacrosanct Sheri Law which is based on the 'uncreated Koran.' The Moslem

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Republic of Syria agreed to it, possibly reserving the intention to obstruct or control its application. It was a price to be paid for independence from the Mandate, and a means of unifying the heterodox elements in the country by the predominant partner agreeing to be regarded as a community like other communities, and consequently subject, like them, to a Communities Ordinance. But, since hegemony has not at present been achieved by the Moslem Republic of Syria, she has repudiated the Communities Ordinance as being destructive of sacred Moslem Law.

If France decided to maintain the existing regional Governments, which correspond to the prevailing temper of its various races and sects, with herself as the co-ordinating Power, it would meet with the approval of many of the Syrian people, and presumably would be justified by the situation. That situation is indeed critical. The Syrian Prime Minister who conducted the negotiations in Paris with M. Bonnet, and who had the internal weakness of his country, as well as Turkish and Italian ambitions and aspirations in the Mediterranean in view, was convinced that Syrian independence could only be preserved by a close military alliance with France. The soundness of his judgment is confirmed by despatches sent on 20th February, from Angora, Rome and Damascus, reporting riots in Damascus, Aleppo, Hama and other towns, and that Italy had declared her interest in Syria as an imperial and Moslem Power and invited Turkey to take note of it.

Efforts for appeasement, made by the Syrian President, Hashem Bek El-Attassy, began thereafter to prevail, and the Nationalist *bloc*, which had expressed its determination not to serve in any future Cabinet, finally consented to serve under Lutfi Haffar, and a Ministry was formed in the evening of 23rd February. Its declared policy is to calm public opinion, and to collaborate with the French authorities until the problem of the ratification of the French-Syrian Treaty has been finally solved. In calmer mood they may be expected to appreciate more justly the formal declaration, often repeated by France, that she

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does not regard her present relationship with Syria as the final one. At present, she is guarding from jeopardy, and possible loss, Syria's most precious jewel—her independence.

Syrian Nationalists are ambitious, having a vision of a 'Greater Syria' which would include Palestine, with the possible adhesion of Transjordan, together to form an Arab *bloc*. The project has certain merits. Arab numerical preponderance being thus so firmly assured, a large scale immigration of Jews would be encouraged. No Syrian delegation, however, was included among the delegations which were invited to the London Conference on Palestine.

Amid the conflict of interests and consequent disunion in Syria, Christians everywhere may derive encouragement from the unity and close co-operation of the missionaries who belong to some thirty-five missions and religious agencies, and are grouped together as 'The United Missionary Council of Syria and Palestine.'

Among these there are Syrian Indigenous Church bodies whose influence at this time of crisis is naturally considerable.

There is in Europe a concerted, organized attempt to secularize the minds of millions of Christian people. Europe and the Americas have populations totalling 725,000,000, and of these, 240,000,000 claim no connection with organized Christianity.

* * * *

For some years special efforts have been made to indoctrinate Russian children and youth in Godless doctrine, but not with the success anticipated. A report from Russia says that a fresh effort is to be made, and children, before entering the schools, are to be given a paper setting forth their duty in ten commandments. The first commandment states: 'If you wish to be a good pupil you must be godless like Stalin.' Another says: 'Greet no clergyman or nun, rather show them the proud hate of a proletarian.'

Yaroslavsky, President of the Godless Associations, has been elected a permanent member of the Academy of Science in recognition of his eminent services. In a speech of thanks he is reported to have said that science without atheism is incomplete; international atheism is the heart of communism, and the Soviet Government will continue to strengthen atheism.